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Future of Sandwich Central School discussed

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SANDWICH — Local residents had many of their fears allayed on Thursday when the Chairman of the Inter-Lakes School Board said the district's leadership has never discussed closing the Sandwich Central School because of declining enrollment.

"The school board has never raised the topic of closing the school. We've never had that conversation," said Paula Adriance, who lives in Sandwich and has served on the board for 20 years. More than 100 people filled the multi-purpose room at the grade K-6 school to attend a meeting called by Sandwich Selectmen to address the future of education in the community.

"The board is concerned about finding an equitable solution for everyone," she said.

In response to shrinking enrollments at SCS, the school board created the District Elementary Enrollment Committee (DEEC). Given the current enrollment trends, the nine-member committee was charged with developing recommendations on how to best manage and staff the district's two elementary schools with respect to student needs, concerns of the three communities and the financial resources of the district.

In January the committee presented its short-term recommendations to the board suggesting that the kindergarten and first grade be merged, creating a multi-age classroom that would require one less teacher. During the meeting that stretched for about an hour and a half, Sandwich Selectman Ben Shaumbaugh called for a show of hands straw poll vote on two issues. Do residents want the local school to continue to remain active and vibrant? And would they be willing to pay more taxes to make that happen? Nearly every person attending raised

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his or her hand to both questions.

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A common theme throughout the meeting was local residents firm belief that the Sandwich Central School was an integral part of the community and that to lose it would change the social fabric of the town. "I will state unequivocally that this town would not be the same without this school," said Jean Ryerson.

John Martin, chairman of the Sandwich Education Committee, presented an overview of the group's work Created to provide local oversight and to support the work of the DEEC, Martin said they are also updating the town's educational master plan that is now 15 years old. Enrollment at SCS peaked at 125 students in 1989 and has been steadily declining since. By 2002 enrollment had dropped to 90 students and over the past five years the average loss has been five children a year. Class sizes have been shrinking, Martin said, because of a combination of factors. Key among them a large percentage of families are home schooling their children for personnel or spiritual reasons, affordable housing is non-existent in Sandwich and the local birth rate has been declining in the recent past.

The annual cost of operating SCS is about \$900,000 and funding is generated by a funding formula that is based half on equalization valuation of each of the three member communities in the district and half on the average daily membership - the number of students each town sends to district schools. Although the funding formula as written can be amended as often as once every five years, Martin said it was last revisited in 1967-68. While the Inter-Lakes Elementary School now has approximately 533 students, enrollment at SCS has recently dipped to 79. But while ILES has 26 classroom teachers, SCS has 6.5.

The Sandwich Education Committee needs volunteers, said Martin, to help develop a community survey and to help explore the potential of making SCS a charter school. "What is the direction that Sandwich wants to take its students in the future," said Martin.

Betsy Paine, a Sandwich resident and attorney who serves on the DEEC, said over the years SCS has experienced dips in enrollment and has reacted by creating multi-age classrooms. This decline is different, she said, because the school board now has a policy regarding class size and both demographics and the fiscal climate have changes. "We need to decide as a community how we value education," she said. To keep SCS a community school, she stressed, will require action by the town. Julie Hird a sixth grade teacher at SCS and a former N.H. teacher of the year suggested adopted an art focuses template. Sandwich is a hot-bed for professional artisans and bringing them into the school could result in multi-age experiential learning and prove to be a boon to attract kids from outside the community.

In response to questions about whether Sandwich was bearing the onus of shrinking class size by itself, Superintendent of Schools Dr. Phillip McCormack said the committee was named the District Elementary Enrollment Committee for

a reason. From 1999 to 2004 in grades K-8 there has been a decrease of 65 students district wide, he said. From 2004 to 2007 an additional loss of 88 students is projected.

Declining enrollments at ILES has resulted in the reduction of one full-time kindergarten teacher, the administrator said. Following some discussion about whether Sandwich could break away from the cooperative school district and run the local school on their own, School Board member Jack Carty of Meredith urged caution. "It's like Humpty Dumpty. Once you start taking it apart you can't put it back together again," he said. While he said he admired the community for its willingness to stand up and defend its school he stressed the district is a cooperative. "Sometimes it's like a contentious marriage, but at the end of the day you're still married. The children will be best served by making the effort to improve what we already have," he said.

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